



## Research article

# Childhood emotional abuse, negative emotion-driven impulsivity, and alcohol use in young adulthood<sup>☆</sup>



Sunny H. Shin<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sungkyu Lee<sup>b,c</sup>, Sae-Mi Jeon<sup>c</sup>, Thomas A. Wills<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Welfare, Soongsil University, South Korea

<sup>c</sup> School of Social Work, Boston University, USA

<sup>d</sup> Cancer Center, University of Hawaii, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Childhood emotional abuse has been linked to problematic alcohol use in later life but there is a paucity of empirically based knowledge about the developmental pathways linking emotional abuse and alcohol use in young adulthood. Using a community sample of young individuals aged 18–25 ( $N=268$ ; female 52%), we performed structural equation modeling to investigate whether emotional abuse influences alcohol use through urgent personality trait and to determine pathways for these effects in a multivariate context. We also examined variations in these pathways by four different alcohol use outcomes including frequency of alcohol use, binge drinking, alcohol-related problems, and alcohol use disorders (AUD). The present study found that emotional abuse was related to urgency, which in turn influenced four types of alcohol use. Urgency may play a significant role in linking childhood maltreatment to alcohol use in young adulthood.

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Childhood emotional abuse is a more hidden form of childhood maltreatment, which can be characterized as degrading, terrorizing, isolating, denying/rejecting, and exploitive/corruptive caregiving (Behl, Conyngnam, & May, 2003; Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009; Wekerle et al., 2009). According to the 2010 Federal report of child maltreatment statistics, 8% of the total 688,251 reported cases of maltreatment were emotional abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Prior research suggested that the incidence of emotional abuse is at least more prevalent than is reported in the national statistics. For example, previous empirical studies suggested that prevalence rates of emotional abuse ranges from 12% to 48%, varying between samples studied (Hamarman, Pope, & Czaja, 2002; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996; Spertus, Yehuda, Wong, Halligan, & Seremetis, 2003; Trickett et al., 2009). Emotional abuse itself is associated with a myriad of neuropsychosocial problems including disturbance in brain limbic systems, dissociative symptoms, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, hostility and delinquency (Braver, Bumberry, Green, & Rawson, 1992; Briere & Runtz, 1990; McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006).

Most forms of childhood maltreatment have been found to be subsequently associated with later harmful alcohol use habits (Dube et al., 2006; Gilbert et al., 2009), even though current evidence is not sufficient to support this relationship among

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\* Corresponding author at: Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Social Work, 1000 Floyd Avenue, Third Floor, Richmond, VA 23284, USA.

adult males who had been victims of childhood maltreatment (Langeland & Hartgers, 1998; Widom & Hiller-Sturmhofel, 2001). A few existing studies analyzing the specific effects of emotional abuse on later alcohol use have found that childhood emotional abuse increases an individual's risk for alcohol problems in adulthood (Chamberland, Fallon, Black, & Trocme, 2011; Moran, Vuchinich, & Hall, 2004; Widom & White, 1997). In a retrospective study of 8,417 adult health maintenance organization (HMO) members, Dube et al. (2006) found that emotional abuse was related to ever drinking alcohol and early onset of alcohol use ( $\leq 14$  years), after the adjustment for demographics and education. Furthermore, emotional abuse was associated with adolescent drinking frequency in a sample of 2,164 students in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades, controlling for age, gender, and family configuration (Moran et al., 2004). These studies provide insight into the possible significant effects of emotional abuse on alcohol use during young adulthood.

While empirical evidence supporting this relationship is emerging, there is a critical gap in our understanding of the mechanisms that explain the associations between emotional abuse and alcohol use in young adulthood. Common theoretical models proposed to explain why victims of child maltreatment are at increased risk for later hazardous drinking come from developmental psychopathology. At the heart of a developmental psychopathology perspective is an assumption that inappropriate development at one stage has a ripple effect on subsequent development (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). For example, childhood maltreatment might lead to the development of less adaptive personality traits, which in turn increases an individual's risk for alcohol problems in adulthood. Indeed, a substantial body of literature suggested that experience of childhood maltreatment predicts the development of urgent personality trait (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2007; Johnson et al., 2001; Kim, Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Manly, 2009; Rogosch & Cicchetti, 2004). Alcohol research has also given increasing attention to the role of urgent personality traits for onset and escalation of alcohol use (Cloninger, Sigvardsson, & Bohman, 1988; Lejuez et al., 2010; Sher & Trull, 1994). Urgent personality trait, also called urgency, is often defined as the propensity to act on impulses, often under the influence of distress (Simons, Dvorak, Batien, & Wray, 2010; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Since numerous studies have found that maltreated children were more prone to negative emotionality and showed greater difficulties in dealing with psychological distress than non-maltreated children, urgency might play an important role in linking child maltreatment and later alcohol use (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Leslie et al., 2003; Shields, Cicchetti, & Ryan, 1994; Trickett, Negri, Ji, & Peckins, 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that victims of child maltreatment might be more inclined to alcohol problems in young adult due to failure to inhibit behavior under the influence of psychological distress. The present study examined the role of urgent personality trait in linking childhood emotional abuse to alcohol problems in young adulthood.

The developmental literature suggests that exposure to childhood maltreatment interferes with normative personality development (Johnson, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, & Bernstein, 1999; Rogosch & Cicchetti, 2004). Since the nurturing roles and protective function of the child's familial and social environment is critical in personality development, for emotionally abused children who often live in hostile and threatening caretaking environments, many positive personality traits are difficult to develop (Cohen, Chen, Crawford, Brook, & Gordon, 2007; Johnson, Smailes, Cohen, Brown, & Bernstein, 2000; Laporte, Paris, Guttman, & Russell, 2011). Specifically, in a longitudinal community sample of 793 children, Johnson et al. (2001) found that emotional abuse, particularly verbal abuse, is associated with borderline, narcissistic, obsessive–compulsive, and paranoid personality disorders during young adulthood. Further, Rogosch and Cicchetti (2004) examined the effects of child maltreatment on the Five-Factor personality dimensions (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience). In the three-year longitudinal analysis with a sample of 211 children, maltreated children appeared to have personality traits that might be best described as antagonistic, less trustworthy, and highly urgent. Thus, it is possible that emotionally abused children are susceptible to the development of an urgent personality trait.

Although urgency is one of the least-studied characteristics of impulsive personality (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001), a few studies have revealed an association between elevated levels of urgency and alcohol use during young adulthood (Fischer, Anderson, & Smith, 2004; Whiteside & Lynam, 2009). For example, Whiteside and Lynam (2009) have found evidence of binge drinking and alcohol use disorders (AUD) among urgent individuals, while Fischer et al. (2004) discovered positive associations between urgency and alcohol-related problems. However, the association between urgency and alcohol use frequency has been mixed (Magid & Colder, 2007; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003; Shin, Hong, & Jeon, 2012). There has been evidence of both no association and a positive association between urgency levels and frequency of alcohol use. In one study investigating a sample of 267 undergraduate students from a large university setting (52% female, ages 18–26), urgency levels were not found to be associated with alcohol use frequency, but were related to alcohol-related problems (Magid & Colder, 2007). In a study by Cyders et al. (2009) investigating a sample of 293 first-year university students (75% female, average age 18.2 years), an association was found between urgency and drinking frequency, quantity, and alcohol-related problems (Cyders, Flory, Rainer, & Smith, 2009). Inconsistent findings regarding the relation between urgency and alcohol use behaviors may be due to the fact that urgency relates to only certain stages of alcohol use or severe drinking behaviors (e.g., binge drinking). For this reason, examination of the pathways among emotional abuse, urgency and alcohol use needs to consider the heterogeneity of alcohol use behaviors including frequency of alcohol use, alcohol-related problems, binge drinking, and AUD.

Emotional abuse often occurs in conjunction with other forms of maltreatment. For example, a large majority (62–95%) of children who had been neglected and physically abused were also found to have experienced emotional abuse (Braver et al., 1992; Claussen & Crittenden, 1991; Higgins & McCabe, 2001; Trickett et al., 2009). Since risk factors are likely to cluster in the same individuals (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), accounting for other forms of maltreatment experienced by a child may help researchers address the unique contribution of emotional abuse on alcohol use. The present study controlled for

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